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Interview

Conceiving The New in Agnieszka Cieslinska's FIGURATIO¹

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¹ This interview was first published in the book: Silva, P.A. (2019). *Fool of Hope: Hopefool*. İstanbul: Net Kirtasiye



Picture 1 **INTERVIEWEE: AGNIESZKA CIESLINSKA (AC)**

Agnieszka CIESLINSKA (Picture 1) (b.1964) is a Professor of Visual Arts and a graphic artist. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1991; currently runs a studio at the Department of Printmaking of the Warsaw Academy. 2002-2013, Member of the Board of the Tadeusz Kulisiewicz Grants and Prizes Foundation.

Curator of a number of print exhibitions, including Curator of IMPRINT International Graphic Arts Triennial in Warsaw, Poland. Curator, Polish exhibition, "Fusion-International Contemporary Intaglio Prints in Guanlan", China. Curator of TRANSGRAFIKA Polish Artists in The Mariusz Kazana Art Collection, Guangdong Museum of Art, China.

Member of the juries of national and international competitions. Winner of a number of national and international awards; including Kochi International Triennial Awards Exhibition of Prints 2006, Japan, the Award of the Naka-Tosa Museum of Art 2009, Japan and the Award of the 8th Polish Print Triennial, Katowice 2012, Poland. She has presented many solo exhibitions and her works have been showcased at more than 120 exhibitions at home and abroad.

Agnieszka's works are housed in the: National Museum in Warsaw, Poland; The New York Public Library, USA; Frans Masereel Centre, Belgium; The Naka-Tosa Museum of Art, Japan; The Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Egypt; Guanlan Collection of Prints, China, and in other public and private repositories.

INTRODUCTION

The title FIGURATIO of Agnieszka Cieslinska's 2014 exhibition at the Galeri Işık of the Işık University, Istanbul curated by Prof. Dr. Hasip PEKTAŞ, seems the most appropriate to describe her work as it crystallises her focus on the human figure and its transformations. Undoubtedly, the exhibition was the result of a consistent involvement; not only in the figurative art, but also in the thoughtful observation of the human figure and its metamorphosis. It is informed by Cieslinska's belief that the human diversity, characteristics and features are fascinating basis for observation and for wandering in the areas of illusory memory full of evocations and references; where the boundaries between illusion and reality get blurred.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

Contemporary Polish Arts History would reveal that the twin dominant artistic influences on Cieslinska's FIGURATIO are the Traditions of Warsaw Printmaking and Halina Chrostowska. Cieslinska's artistic development has mirrored that of Chrostowska and the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts could be perceived as a mould that has cast both Cieslinska and Chrostowska, but to a greater extension and interest is how their explorations of the Academy's traditions have become a process of which they as luminaries are representative of the Warsaw Academy's epoch status in contemporaneous Polish National and International Arts and Art Education. (<http://culture.pl/en/artist/halina-chrostowska> Last accessed 16 August 2019)

Against the backdrop of the traditions of Warsaw Printmaking, Paul Ade Silva interviews Agnieszka Cieslinska.

PAS: Tell me about the title, FIGURATIO (Latin word for Figuration in English) for your exhibition in Istanbul; how does it encapsulate what is significant in your work?

AC: The title FIGURATIO seems to me to be the most appropriate to describe my work. It draws attention to the shape of the figure and especially the human figure and its metamorphosis. For a number of years now, I have been consistently involved in figurative art, observing the human figure and its transformations. I believe there is something fascinating to observe, human diversity, characteristic features. It is like wandering in the areas of illusory memory, full of evocations and references, where the boundaries between illusion and reality

get blurred. This is the essence that directly impacts my prints.

I often think that I approach man, the human figure, as a tailor, and that graphic figures fit the body of a given person. I take their measurements, and this way their new image is emerging. That certainly involves a little bit of magic, a little bit of mixing imagination and reality.

PAS: Can you talk a little bit more about the elements Figuratio consists of, its graphic forms such as lines, stitches and so on?

AC: My recent "Figurations" series has over time developed to include increasingly fantastical forms, and as I said referring to tailor's forms, my figures display all kinds of lines, whip stitches, different kinds of measurements, signs. All those forms around the figure may bring to mind rudiments of some secret knowledge, which have been lost during the transformations. That way the so-called "humanoid figures" come about, a little like machines, which bring about a kind of nostalgia.

PAS: And the ideal behind the figures?

AC: In my work, it is very important for me to search for an ideal, to search for a beautiful form. At the same time I realize that it is impossible to find ideal beauty, and I think that my ideal graphic form is incomplete. It doesn't display outer beauty, but it surely is somehow gripping. The very important elements in my work are the harmony, proportions and being above all the mystery of the inner life recorded in the sign of the figure.

PAS: Would you like to expound further on how the 'inner life' can be 'recorded in the sign of the figure', to use your own words.

AC: Over the centuries the figure of the man has been the focal point of thought on the category of beauty and harmony, which reflect the universe, because the man has been treated like a small world.

"The beauty of the world is what we see in the individual elements, such as the stars in the sky, the birds in the air, the fish in water and the people on the ground." (William of Conches, twelfth century). In modern humanistic reflection, the human body is moulded more by culture than nature. It is treated as form-cut, variable models, cut to fit the times in accordance with the passing fashions.

PAS: Does this explain some uses of Christian icons in your work and do you think they restrict the world your work inhabits?

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AC: I have used the fragment of the altar showing the scene of the Dormition of Virgin Mary.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dormition_of_the_Mother_of_God



Picture 2

The head of Saint John (Picture 2), the hands of Mary, have been pasted into new compositions as a quotation. In this way I am trying to create a combination of the opposites - tradition and modernity. Embedded in my works, there are collages: fragments of faces, arms

or hands, which I have borrowed from other pieces of art. My works refer to the past to the feeling of nostalgia for the past time and at the same time to our civilization, in which the man is clothed in a limiting form. Repeated Tailors mannequin / sewing dummy / leitmotif of my compositions with the cut costume can be interpreted as the image of the modern man entangled in historical contexts.



Picture 3

People say they often turn on some music while working. I always listen to audio books, and that is a bit like a drug. I think that listening to novels or plays, the melody of words oozing into the room, has a huge influence on the emerging pieces. I have recently even started to add titles of the novels or plays I listened to the figures, because they have an impact on the nature of the piece. This is why there are pieces called "Figure Macbeth" or "Figure Nastasya Filipovna", which refer to the audio books I listened to during making them.

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<http://community.middlebury.edu/~beyer/courses/previous/ru351/studentpapers/Women.shtml>

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/i/the-idiot/character-analysis/nastasya-filippovna-barashkov>

PAS: Walk us through the characterisation of your figures.

AC: My graphical figures are characters from one spectacle of imagination, not exactly defined, realistic fragments. They are reminiscent of technical drawings of a humanoid machine, in which parts of the face and torso have been dimensioned, like a mechanical device.

During the exhibition I presented a video animation, which shows a drawing as a starting point of my work. The animation shows the creative process of selected works from my exhibition. Drawing is always at the beginning of the work, it's the most direct and the simplest form of expression, a trace of a gesture of the unique move of a hand of the human mind. It is a world beyond time and space, where the graphic forms emerge from the tangle of lines and characters.



Picture 4

PAS: How do you deal with the restriction that comes with graphic Art processing and techniques?

AC: Graphic art technique imposes a kind of limit. It is technology. But within those technological limits one can, I believe, find creative freedom. This is something very important and significant to me, something that becomes increasingly deep and developing. It's like in ancient times, when perfection was prized higher than individuality, so they thought there ought to be a canon for reproducing a beautiful pattern. This limitation in terms of graphic techniques seems to me to be such freedom, enabling incredible changes, incredible creative solutions.

I make prints using traditional techniques. I always begin with designing and those designs are realised spontaneously. First there is just a kind of intuition. They are realised in 1:1 scale, and with project and preparing serigraph print; I have a ground print that is my developed form, which I've decided to accept; as something that I find moving, something that represents the heart of the matter, and I put more layers onto that form, with some other techniques: aquatint and etching, often dry-point or stencils.

PAS: Take us on your processing and technique journey for *Figuratio*, your exhibition that has been so well-received in Turkey.

AC: Thank you. In the process of creating prints for the cycle, *Figuratio*, I combined several matrices prepared in different techniques. I often use serigraphy as ground print with an etching or a dry-point printed on it to give the work a unique texture. I stick tissue paper on some parts of the work. I have adhered print paper to tissue paper. Then re-print the matrix developed in dry-point. This is my own kind of chine colle. I really wanted to give my prints the character of painting matter, so I used acrylic paint applied directly on the paper of prints and again reprint on it in my earlier prints the most important elements were the lights and the specific type of the graphic matter. / cycles: *The Last Supper*, *The Common Day* and *The Tale Rediscovered*.

I used traditional metal printing techniques, such as etching and aquatint. By removing some parts of aquatint and etching from the metal matrix I achieved a specific type of matter. Thanks to deeply etched metal matrix and traces of scraper I got the unique structure of my works.

PAS: What about the experimental cycle of *Tailor*, for instance?

AC: In the experimental cycle, *Tailor*, I used a special tear-resistant paper called tyvec. Where I employed new formal techniques: elements that stick out of the surface, fragments that are

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sewn together, stitches, the lines of tailor's patterns pressed to the surface of the work. All these elements build a new quality of work as a spatial form. Sewing together tear-resistant paper or cutting the shapes of forms change my graphic design.



Picture 5

PAS: Since printmaking is seen by artists in general, as an unusual art form, and most discussions about printmaking almost always include the technique and process. So, let me ask you what I consider the more important questions about printmaking: How does the technique and process serve the expression of the artists' intentions and do they complement and enrich their ideas?

AC: I realise that in today's world, one can have a piece made to order, and that can also be attractive, but I am hoping that traditional printmaking and all that surrounds it will survive contemporary technological possibilities and that next to very modern works, those for which we employ very old printmaking techniques, handling both the MATRYCA and the paper on which the image is printed; that all that will stand the test of time and will be our legacy.

PAS: How do you perceive the underlying semiotics of your graphic art forms?

AC: My graphic art forms are not just simple signs. The world that surrounds us is not made up of simple forms. These forms have to be in a way simplified, in order to get to the heart of the matter, to show the most important features, something that I've found truly inspiring, something that to me is the essence of the figure, but that figure to some degree has to reflect life and its actuality.

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Picture 6

PAS: There is substantial evidence that Chrostowska combined etching, aquatint, lift ground processes, dry point, stencil, screen print. Also, that some of her prints were printed with deep etched metal plates and with cut out plates of linoleum, which produced the effect of relief. How has Chrostowska's work influenced your own work?

AC: Chrostowska was my teacher and her work and way of thinking about graphic workshop has had a lasting influence on me.

PAS: Is Chrostowska your only main influence?

AC: I draw inspiration for my works from the literary sources, images or stories from the past which are not only contemporary reminiscences, but sometimes they date back to the middle Ages or the Renaissance. One of the most important medieval inspirations was the altar of St. Mary's Church in Krakow by Wit Stwosz, the famous artist who created these sculptures in the fifteenth century.

PAS: Thank you Cieslinska, for this interview and for giving us deeper insight into your work. I appreciate what you've shared with me and believe our readers will appreciate your work in light of the different genres in which you're creating.

AC: You're most welcome, Paul. It's my delight and thanks to you too.



Picture 7

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